

JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

EDWIN HANSON

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JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
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INTERVIEWEE: MR. EDWIN HANSON

INTERVIEWER: MR. GLENN HUGHES

HUGHES: This is an interview with Edwin Hanson for the Joliet Junior College Oral History Program by Glenn Hughes at 944 Unis, Joliet Township, March 2, 1974, at 2:00 p.m. Mr. Hanson, I would like for you to tell me a little about your family background and your early life in Joliet.

HANSON: Well, I was born in Joliet. I've lived all my life here. Well, I was born on Virginia Street in 1900. And well, I've grown up on the East Side of Joliet, mostly on Logan Avenue which at that time was on the outskirts of Joliet..... What else do you want to know?

HUGHES: Tell us a little about your family, such as

HANSON: Oh, I was one of six children. My father worked for the American Steel and Wire Company when it first started in Joliet.

HUGHES: Tell me a little about that. When was that? When was the first steel company built here?

HANSON: Oh, I can't say; but I would say it was in around probably 1895 or so.

HUGHES: Was it located at the same spot as it is now?

HANSON: No. It was located...there was a wire mill there on Scott Street; but then I think he worked in Rockdale. They built a new plant in Rockdale at that time.



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HUGHES: Tell us about your earlier home. What kind of building was it? What type? What it looks like?

HANSON: Oh, we lived in...I would say it was about a six-room house. We had several lots there. Oh, we had a large garden, grew a lot of vegetables, everything of that kind, and chickens. We had chickens. When we were young boys, we raised rabbits. We grew up on the outskirts of Joliet. We ran through the woods and enjoyed ourselves in the ~~summer~~, swam in the creeks, and in the quarries in the early days.

HUGHES: What was your mother, did she have any other jobs or was she primarily a mother?

HANSON: [Laughter] She had six kids. She wouldn't need no other job! She was busy. In those days they didn't have any of this modern equipment either. It was rubbing the clothes on a washboard and doing everything by hand. Canning...she was busy from morning till night.

HUGHES: Tell us your first recollection of anything modern. What was your first recollection of anything modern?

HANSON: Well, there was a woman in our neighborhood that she got a wash machine that she run by hand. It had a lever there that she pushed back and forth and run the wash machine, and that was about the first time I seen anything that was really modern.

HUGHES: When was that? What year was that?

HANSON: Oh, I would say...that when I was really young...probably about nineteen or maybe ten or so. Something like that, probably before.

HUGHES: What was the first modern thing that you had at your home?

HANSON: Well, we put gaslight in our house. We had gaslight and that was quite a big improvement. And we also went and had gas for cooking. That was about the first improvement we had.

HUGHES: What year was that would you say?

HANSON: Oh, I would say that was probably in nineteen...I would think probably twelve or fourteen.

HUGHES: Was that natural or was that propane?

HANSON: No, that was natural gas. In those days natural gas (not natural gas)...it was manufactured gas by the...they had a coke plant, I think it was on Broadway or someplace, or a gas plant that made the gas itself.

HUGHES: What was your first recollection of schools?

HANSON: Well, we went to Woodland School. I don't know, it wasn't too bad. It was...Woodland School in those days was a really nice location with plenty of trees around it. It was quite a beautiful schoolyard.

HUGHES: Did you go to high school?

HANSON: Well, I started to high school, and then we got sick. We got scarlet fever. We were quarantined in for about six weeks; and I figured, "That's it; there's no use in going back now."

HUGHES: When was that? When was your scarlet fever?

HANSON: Oh, I would say probably when I was about fifteen years old, something like that.

HUGHES: What's your earliest recollection of anything outstanding being

invented in the United States that you remember?

HANSON: Well, the most outstanding thing that I remember was the radio.

It was the first thing like that when they first came out with the crystal sets and anything like that; and they got bigger all the time, you know, where they finally got away from the headphones, and they had the speakers, loud speakers, in it. And we spent nights just seeing how far away you could get, you know.

HUGHES: What thing stands out in your mind about the early history of Joliet when you were a youth?

HANSON: Well, I suppose you could say (and I've heard others say) that track elevation in Joliet was about the biggest improvement in Joliet where the railroad tracks used to run right down through the center of town. And they had the Union Depot which most of the cities of this size envied, you know, that we were so much farther ahead then. It was quite an improvement without no...the railroad crossings in the street.

HUGHES: What year was that would you say?

HANSON: I can't really exactly remember; but I would say it was about 1915, something like that.

HUGHES: Well, tell me some more about anything else that stands out in your mind.

HANSON: Well, I remember when one of our neighbors got an automobile, his first automobile, the first automobile in the neighborhood; and everybody came flocking around to see it. It was quite a good car. I think it was an Overland; and we really envied those people, you know. That was quite

a thing in those days you know, in early days the first automobile.

HUGHES: How about political things? What do you remember about political parties or political people? Did you ever meet anyone of any significance in political life that you can remember?

HANSON: No, I don't really recall anybody, any particular person. The only thing I remember is probably the election of Woodrow Wilson. He was elected president.

HUGHES: What made that stand out?

HANSON: Well, because I think it was the first Democrat for many years that was elected. It seems to me that there was a ... it was a ... that Republicans had Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt; and I don't know who it was and that made, allowed, the Democrats to get in there.

HUGHES: Be not prejudiced now. What president stands out in your mind the most?

HANSON: Well, could there be anybody else but Franklin Roosevelt standing out the most? Whether you liked him or yet hated him, it don't make no difference.

HUGHES: What one thing stands out in your mind about Franklin Roosevelt?

HANSON: Well, when he said our boys will never be called upon to fight on foreign soil.

HUGHES: When did he make that statement?

HANSON: Before the war. I think it was before one of the elections, you

know; it was an election day promise I guess.

HUGHES: Okay, how about changes in life styles?

HANSON: How about when they started?

HUGHES: Yes, what would you say stands out the most in your mind as you go along...think about life styles. What life styles changed? Such as the automobile, how is that changed as the automobile has become....

HANSON: Well, of course, the automobile is changed practically every year, from the little here and there. I suppose on the automobile I would say when they got away from the crank to the self starter was the main thing. You didn't have to be afraid of a broken arm anymore then.

HUGHES: One factor I like about, tell me a little bit about prohibition.

HANSON: Prohibition.

HUGHES: What stands out about that?

HANSON: Well, there is one thing about prohibition that is you can't make people do it by passing laws. If you're for it or against it, you don't seem that the government can pass a law and make people change their morals or their habits of the people.

HUGHES: What do you remember about those days, the prohibition days?

HANSON: Well, there seemed to be an awful lot of killing and going on. Graft, too, I think.

HUGHES: Let's skip over that; let's go back to after you got out of high school, after you had that scarlet fever epidemic. What did you do then

after that? What kind of job did you have?

HANSON: Well, I took and got a job at the Gerlach-Barklow; that was the first job I had there. And I thought it was real nice, not bad at all. Nice place to work. Real pleasant. Wasn't much money, but real nice.

HUGHES: What was your first recollection of money, what kind of pay checks did you bring home?

HANSON: Oh, I imagine I got about five dollars a week or so.

HUGHES: Would that be about...Oh, let's see; how much money would that be an hour? Did you work an eight-hour day, five-day-a-week situation?

HANSON: Oh, we worked, I think we worked six days a week. I wouldn't say if we worked six, if it was five and a half or six. I imagine it was six days.

HUGHES: Just eight hours a day. You hear so much of an issue about this children having to work long hours for no pay.

HANSON: I think that in that place, I think they worked eight hours a day because they were mostly women that worked there, I think. And... but the wages all over were poor. At that time, if you had a job, the average job paid maybe ten, twelve dollars a week.

HUGHES: What year are we talking about now?

HANSON: Oh, this would be before the first world war.

HUGHES: What type of job did you have at Gerlach-Barklow?

HANSON: Oh, they made these calenders that had tin on the end of them. At

first that's what I did. They had an apparatus there that put the tin on the end of the calendar.

HUGHES: How long did you stay at Gerlach-Barklow?

HANSON: I would say a year. A year or so.

HUGHES: Was that located in the same spot as it is supposedly located now at the corner of ...

HANSON: Yes, it was the same thing.

HUGHES: Where was it, Washington and Richards? Was it as large as it is right now?

HANSON: No, it wasn't. They had built on at different times after that.

HUGHES: What was your next job you went into after that one year?

HANSON: I think I worked for the National Carton Company.

HUGHES: Where was that located?

HANSON: That was up in Ingalls Park off of...well, I'll tell you...it was at Park Road I think.

HUGHES: What type of job did you do there?

HANSON: Well, it was...tying the cartons in bundles, wrapping them up and tying them in bundles.

HUGHES: When did you get married, now? You're getting close I would say. You are probably in the 1920's, getting close to the 1920's.

HANSON: I don't know just...that was somewhere near there I suppose, before

the first world war. That was somewhere in that direction. I was probably only maybe seventeen years old then or so.

HUGHES: What was the first job you remember staying at any length? Which one did get pretty permanent with....

HANSON: Well, I worked for the Pratt Manufacturing Company. I stayed there quite a long time. I was out of there a couple of times, but went back there and worked again.

HUGHES: What year did you start there?

HANSON: Oh, I would say that must have been 1918, I think.

HUGHES: What kind of jobs were there at Pratt's? What did Pratt's do?

HANSON: In the beginning I worked in their tin shop. We did a lot of repair work and putting up in their foundry of pipes and different things. They also made at that time a popcorn machine. They took over another company that had it before, and they turned out these here popcorn machines. We worked on them quite a lot, on the tin and the metal work on those there.

HUGHES: They went into other things at Pratt's, didn't they? They didn't do popcorn machines for ever and ever; you went into something else. Right?

HANSON: No, gradually that popcorn machine business just sort of petered out; it was on a small scale. Then I went into a roller-bearing plant down here, and I worked there for many years when it seemed to pick up and went quite well for them.

HUGHES: Were ball bearings just first coming into being then?

HANSON: No. This company had been in business in Chicago, and they made

mostly bearings for industrial purposes. The power transmission, you know... Most of your machines then were run by belts in the plants. They had these line shafts and counter shafts and things like that to keep them from the central motor. Of course, nowadays every machine has a motor of its own.

HUGHES: Were you married during the 20's?

HANSON: /laughter/ Me married in the 20's? I was married in the 30's.

HUGHES: Was it '36?

HANSON: '36? I thought it was '35. Maybe it ain't long; it just seems long.

HUGHES: One thing they never speak of in history is the Stock Market Crash. What do you remember about those days?

HANSON: It didn't bother me any because I didn't have any stock. But I remember people buying it, and they thought they were rich until they found out they didn't have nothing.

HUGHES: What do you remember about those days, about standing in line for food? Did you have a job during those days?

HANSON: Practically every day.

HUGHES: You were working at Pratt's then at that time?

HANSON: Yes, I almost worked every day. I didn't lose very much time at all.

HUGHES: I hear about standing in line for food and this type of thing.

What do you remember about those days?

HANSON: I don't remember ever seeing anybody standing in line for food.

I don't know, there might have been some place there is that they did.

They had relief. They -- most people -- had enough to eat.

HUGHES: What do you remember about the WPA?

HANSON: From what I saw of them they were out scratching along the road there digging up trees and things like that. I don't know whether they did more harm than good or not, or what they did.

HUGHES: What do you remember about your President at that time, during the black days of the '30's?

HANSON: Roosevelt?

HUGHES: Hoover.

HANSON: Hoover, I think, was a good man only he had a Democratic congress; and his hands were tied pretty well. Most people thought the thing would be over in a short while, you know. Maybe with spending a few million dollars they could have stopped the whole panic of people running on the banks; but there was a lot of politics involved in there. And instead of the two parties cooperating, they wanted to make it as bad as they could for each other. Finally every bank started closing, one after the other. Things looked pretty bad there for awhile.

HUGHES: Would you say they were playing games, and all at once it got away from them?

HANSON: I would say that no one ever expected it to get as bad as it did.

-- as quickly as it did, too. They probably by just a few million dollars of spending in the right place, they would have bolstered up the peoples' confidence. They could have saved a few of these banks. Of course, nobody wanted to help these banks because I guess people didn't like bankers anyway.

HUGHES: What's your first impression of Franklin Delano Roosevelt when he first started his movement to president?

HANSON: He never really appealed to me, to tell you the truth. He looked to me like just a big bagful of hot air. My opinion never changed all the time, of him.

HUGHES: How about some of his political ideas that he was coming out with?

HANSON: I think if he would have taken two terms and quit he would have probably gone down as a great man. But wanting to set himself up as king, that will show up bad in history.

HUGHES: Tell me a little bit about your farm work. You had a farm, is that correct?

HANSON: I had a few acres of ground. When I was young and full of pep, I used to get out there and grow things.

HUGHES: Tell me about your recollection of old days of farming versus now in the new days.

HANSON: The difference is it's a lot of money. Today if you want to be a farmer, you have to be a man with money. It's no use thingking about it unless you've got it.

HUGHES: How about the equipment in the old days? What was it like? Did you do any work with horses and so on?

HANSON: I never had any horses on this farm. I had a tractor and sit when I worked. It was just a small scale.

HUGHES: This is for Joliet Junior College. What was your first recollection of the junior college? You were born practically in the year that it opened. You said you were born in 1900; they opened, I believe, in 1901.

HANSON: Well, I never knew very much about it. I was too busy with other things that were more fun, and so I never paid any attention to it. When I went to high school there, I know that they had junior college there; and I heard some of the fellows talking. But otherwise I never paid very much attention to them there.

HUGHES: Tell me your recollection of the two wars. The first war you would have probably been around 15, 16, 17 years old, and the second war you went through. What things stand out in your mind about the first world war?

HANSON: The first world war everybody was full of patriotism, all ready to go. Everybody was going to kill the Kaiser. If there were some people around that had a little German accent or something like that, there were some of the people who wanted to get over there and paint their houses yellow or something like that. And you had to be awful careful because the people were really hepped up on this war business. But the second one, people lost their enthusiasm a whole lot because they didn't make the world safe for democracy. And so it was just something they had to do, that's all.

HUGHES: What were your feelings, and what were the feelings of the people about us becoming involved in World War II?

HANSON: Well, the English had a lot of propaganda over here from which you can understand; and I think we wanted to make the world safe for the Englishers more than anything else. We had...actually from looking at it from now, we had no business over there at all meddling in these European affairs. That was our undoing right there. We were going to make the world safe for democracy and the next one we made it safe for Communism. We did! You can't get away from that. In these other wars I don't know what we made the world safe for there. It wasn't safe at all -- for nobody -- I don't think.

HUGHES: What do you remember about a....we had a large.... Did you work at any time at the ammunition plant at Joliet when it was working during World War II?

HANSON: No, no.

HUGHES: At any time? Did you work at Pratt's during World War II?

HANSON: Oh, yes.

HUGHES: What type of things were you making there then? Were you making things for ...

HANSON: They seemed to have a priority there; and we made a lot of bearings for farm equipment, too. And they did also some things for the...these here. They turned out some parts for the airplanes, you know, the hydraulic lifts on them and things like that, parts of them. They also tried to make the core for the bullets; but I don't know, they didn't have very much luck at it.

HUGHES: Let's jump over the wars now. What is your recollection of the late '40's after the war had just finished -- type situation -- '45, '46, and that era?

HANSON: Well, I don't know. I don't remember very much about it. It seemed it went by pretty fast. I don't know of anything special that stands out.

HUGHES: How about Truman's administration?

HANSON: Truman?

HUGHES: Truman and Dewey -- the big people.

HANSON: Oh, Truman. I don't know about Truman. He...I don't know...he was really a person of the people-like, you know. And I think he was a rather fair-minded man. More fair-minded man than Franklin Roosevelt.

HUGHES: What do you remember of the election, the big one that they talk about, the '50, 1950, the late '50's or early '50 one, between Truman and Dewey, when Dewey was predicted to win that one?

HANSON: Well, I don't know and I don't know if I really cared very much.

HUGHES: Alright. What changes do you remember happening in the United States in that area...the late, right after World War II, after the atomic bomb was dropped in Japan?

HANSON: I don't know if there is anything that stands out special.

HUGHES: Okay, jump to the early '50's then. Were you still working at Pratt's in the early '50's?

HANSON: I tell you the place folded up. I think just about 1950. Then I got a job working for the Matheson Company.

HUGHES: What was their product?

HANSON: Their product was gases. They dealt in gases for industries. A lot of it was experimented in schools, too. They put these gases into small containers and cylinders and sold them to schools, colleges, schools, and things like that. And they bought them, you could say, and sold them in...and put it up in smaller containers....and sold it for in small purpose, where they only wanted a small quantity at one time.

HUGHES: What kind of gases were these?

HANSON: Well, they had about 90 different kinds of gases. They had everything from ethylene to phosodrine and everything imaginable.

HUGHES: What were they experimenting with at the schools? What type of gas there?

HANSON: Well, they used all of these things like hydrogen sulfide, hydrogen chloride, all these things are...oh, everything...ammonia, amines, monomethylamine, and trimethylamine...there are dozens of other ones that they used for, you know, they used in school. They used a lot of this in their process of making stuff, catalyst and things like that.

HUGHES: What other companies..what else...were they supplying besides school?

HANSON: Oh, practically every company in the country. Oh, like Dow Chemical and Monsanto and these here drug companies, oh, like Upjohn. Any

number of these here. Everyone of them you could say were their customers.

HUGHES: Was this a new company in the Joliet area?

HANSON: Well, they originated in New Jersey, and they started this plant in Joliet here. Now they have several, any number of plants in...scattered all over the country.

HUGHES: Was this plant here one of their first plants in the area?

HANSON: It's their second plant; Joliet was their second plant.

HUGHES: Do you have any idea why they would pick this area?

HANSON: I think it was kind of centrally located near to Chicago; and they didn't want to be right in the big city, but on the outskirts of it. Sort of central, you know, in the middle of the country.

HUGHES: Where's this company located at?

HANSON: It's located at the end of Richards Street and Manhattan Road.

HUGHES: Can you name some products that you can remember that these gases were sent in and finally made into?

HANSON: They used ethylene to ripen bananas, you know. They turn out skin ; and they had a room; and they would turn out so much of this gas into this here room; and in the morning, instead of being green, they'd be yellow. And they would have only put so much in a certain space so it would keep it from being explosive or flammable.

HUGHES: Anything else? That's very interesting.

HANSON: Well, they said they have some of their gas mixtures that were up

in some of these here...what do you call this...going around the world of earth...orbiting the earth? They claimed they had some of their gases in, mixed gases too, like maybe helium and methane and stuff like that, and they used them in different things.

HUGHES: The gases were actually made here in Joliet?

HANSON: Well, they would mix them here in Joliet, you see. Some of them were kind of...they're used on detecting contamination from radio activity.

HUGHES: And this was what year? Around the 1950's, early '50's?

HANSON: Up until the, into the '60's. I suppose they are still doing it. I haven't been down there, but I imagine that they are still turning out that and washed up just like it.

HUGHES: What was your job?

HANSON: Well, I filled cylinders with gases, and I also worked in the shipping department. The last job I had was in the shipping department, and I shipped out the cylinders.

HUGHES: That is interesting. Anything else you can think of them sending to, what they actually did with these gases..the various gases...besides ripening bananas and possibly being in some of our shots in the orbit of the earth? What other things do you remember that these gases did?

HANSON: Well, they used to send these here medical companies like Ely-Lilly and I didn't know just what the process they used on them. They sold lots of these here gases. They had them come in big tanks, you know; and then they would put them in smaller cylinders so the companies could handle them.

HUGHES: How about during this time, the changes in population? You started back in 1900 with hardly any people at all in Joliet and people living around you. When did you first get the impression things were really starting to grow in the Joliet area?

HANSON: Well, they certainly have grown since the second world war. You'd hardly recognize the town. What used to be the edge of town, now there's miles on the West Side, miles and miles of built up.

HUGHES: Where is your first recollection of the end of Joliet being? Do you remember what used to go around Joliet..the edge of it being?

HANSON: Well, we lived on the very edge of it; there was hardly nothing left after it, only cornfields, when I was young. And where I remember and knew the people that farmed on the West Side were just about where Honiotes' store would be. That was their farm right there, and there was nothing only farms from there on.

HUGHES: What do you remember about the canal? That always interests me.

HANSON: Which canal was this?

HUGHES: The one coming right through the middle of Joliet.

HANSON: You mean the old I & M or the, this here Chicago drainage canal?

HUGHES: Tell us a little about the Chicago drainage canal. What do you remember about that?

HANSON: It used to stink like the dickens, but it has improved. That's one thing I'll say; it don't smell so bad anymore.

HUGHES: Do you remember the horses drawing boats along the I & M?

HANSON: No, that was before my time. I remember when they had boats on there; but they used to be, when I was young, they used to have houseboats on down by Adler's Store. There were houseboats, and people used to live in them right down there.

HUGHES: Do you remember what people lived there?

HANSON: I don't know who they were. There were people in them, I don't know.

HUGHES: Oh, that would be...would that be the poor people, or would that be the rich people?

HANSON: I imagine they might of thought they were pretty well off.

HUGHES: What do you remember about the development of the downtown area of Joliet? I've seen some plans where they have thought of building parks along the retaining walls of the canal and all this type of thing. Was there talk at one time of doing things like this?

HANSON: Well, at one time they had a park down there by the river and the canal; and it was called Riverview Park. But it...of course, what happened to it I don't know.

HUGHES: How many changes in manners in other type of things that have changed during the..from the 19...from the time you can remember to now? What outstanding things stick in your mind about the different manners that have changed? Life styles?

HANSON: I don't know. I imagine that manners have gone down the drain.

Well, children has changed the most. You wouldn't dare, when I was young, to talk to your parents or even any adult. You would be laying underneath the table. You didn't talk back or nothing like that.

HUGHES: What changes has television brought to your life? What would you do after supper back in 1915, 1914?

HANSON: Well, when we were young, after supper we would jump up as fast as we could and went out and played baseball. As long as it was light. In the summer time when the weather was nice, we jumped up from the table; and quick as we could, we got out there and started playing ball. And before that, when we were younger, we always keep a ... kids entertained themselves with games. We had lots of games that we played. We always were busy and had fun. Oh, lots of fun!

HUGHES: Was that your last job or did you have another job after the gas company?

HANSON: No, I...after about 1965 or so I quit; I retired.

HUGHES: So that was your final job in 1965, working with this company?

HANSON: Yes.

HUGHES: Tell us a little bit about your retirement. How's retirement in 1965 to now?

HANSON: It's just swell. I tell you there is nothing to it. I always heard that if a person quit working they would die. But, that's a lot of baloney. You just will not die; you will start to live. /Laughter/

HUGHES: So, if you had to do it over again, you would still retire in 1965?

HANSON: As quick as I could figure that the pension was enough to live on.

HUGHES: Yes.

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